CONTINUING BROTHER MARTIN'S REFORMING WAYS
Luke 5:29-38
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On November 10, 1483, a son was born to Hans and Margaret Luther in the German industrial town of Eisleben. The next day, Margaret and Hans presented their son at the Tower Chapel of St. Peter's Church and named him for the calendar saint of that day, Martin of Tours. Martin Luther has been called the last man of the Middle Ages and the first man of the Modern Age. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote: "Martin Luther the Reformer is one of the most extraordinary persons in history, and has left a deeper impression of his presence in the modern world than any other except Columbus." Time Magazine last week noted that more books have been written about Luther than about any other person with the exception of Jesus. Even East Germany, which used to be embarrassed by the cause Luther represented, has bowed to history and reclaimed him as a son. Beginning today, Reformation Sunday, the Christian world, East and West, will be celebrating the 500th Anniversary of his birth.

Luther had a difficult home life as a young lad, with his stern, demanding, and punishing parents. He was a bright student, entered an Augustinian monastery over the strenuous objections of his father and was ordained a priest in 1507 - at the age of 24. He continued his theological study and after distinguishing himself as a scholar, was appointed to the faculty of the University of Wittenberg. Luther's personal religious pilgrimage was characterized by his inability to find a consistent peace with God, regardless of what he did. In fact the harder he tried, the more spiritual disciplines he assumed, the more prayers said and pilgrimages taken, the more distant God seemed. "How," he wrote, "can I get a God who is gracious?"

It was through his arduous study of scripture that the gracious God began to emerge for Luther. Faith in God's goodness began to replace the old obsession with performing good works to please God. And then history intervened.

Pope Leo X, who desparately needed cash to continue work on St. Peter's in Rome, sold the Archbishopric of Mainz to a young incompetent, Albert of Brandenburg. Part of the bargain was a special sale of indulgences in Albert's territory half the proceeds of which would go directly to Rome, the other half of which Albert would get to repay the bankers from whom he had borrowed the money to pay for his ecclesiastical office. It was not an unusual transaction at the time. Albert hired a Dominican monk to sell the indulgences - summary pardons from past, present, and future sins, which one could purchase for oneself or one's relative. Tetzel was his name and he had a drum and a sales jingle that he sang - about a soul flying from purgatory every time a coin was placed on the drum.

At the age of 34 Luther took pen in hand, and in a level, but righteous anger wrote out 95 reasons or theses why he thought the whole system was unfaithful and sinful. Their intimidating title was "Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences," and he either circulated them around the university community or, as tradition has it, nailed them to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg on October 30, 1517; tonight - the Eve of All Saints Day.

Within one month Luther's 95 Theses had been translated, reproduced and circulated widely. Albert reported the incident to Leo whose first response was to call Luther a "drunken German who would think differently when sober." Not long after, however, the Pope was calling him a "wild boar in the Lord's Vineyard;" condemning him and his work and, in 1521 excommunicating him, and the Reformation was spreading rapidly through Germany.

> But we would not have you ignorant, brethren, concerning those who are asleep (in death), that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. Therefore comfort one another with these words. (I Thessalonians 4:9-14, 18)

Christians shouldn't grieve--the words are there alright. But the whole passage says something else and something more: We should "not grieve as others do who have no hope." That is, the Christian **does** grieve, but with the difference that we have a hope. Jesus put it this way: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

What is the hope? What is the comfort? Well, consider the most drastic form of sorrow—sorrow caused by death. Faced with death, our own or the death of a loved one, our hope, the comfort of those who mourn, can be put very simply: We believe God creates our life so we can find fulfillment. We observe that death is an inescapable part of life; therefore, death must also be designed by God. Without going into theological subtleties, then, logic concludes that God intends death as part of human fulfillment. We can confidently reach that conclusion even though we don't have complete knowledge of all the details. Therefore, we have a hope, a comfort, which transforms our deepest grieving over death itself. All griefs are meant to be part of our fulfillment, just as our joys are.

I suppose that reading the congregation's memorials during last Sunday's worship made me more sensitive than usual, but I'm amazed how often I've been a part of grief conversations this week. It was a mother's death on one occasion. In two instances church members were faced with the sadness of moving parents into nursing homes. Another learned a parent has cancer. Another realized her long illness prohibits attending a favorite relative's wedding. Two marriages breaking up, a forced early retirement, the vividly painful recollection of a spouse's death, the loss of ability to talk, failing eyesight, feeling abandoned by old friends...that is quite a range of serious sorrows to witness in just a few days. Clearly, it is the very nature of life to experience sorrow in many ways.

A loss first brings us a sense of shock. We are made in such a way that we can bear pain and sorrow and even tragedy. However, when the sorrow, the tragedy, is overwhelming, often we are temporarily anesthetized by shock. We should be grateful for such anesthesia, for it keeps us from having to face the entire grim reality all at once. This shock stage may last anywhere from a few minutes to a few hours to a few days. Sometimes it may persist to an unhealthy extent and then help is needed. But the shock of grief's early stage is not to be feared.

There are times when you visit the funeral home and see a bereaved wife who appears almost radiant. People comment: "What serene faith she has!" We are so mistaken to equate faith with a stoical attitude, and not with tears. The truth of the matter may well be that the woman is experiencing a temporary anesthesia, which is helping her along until she is ready to move to the next stage of grief.

I remember well a man who was unexpectedly fired from a job he had held for twenty years--that's a loss to cause deep grief. He told about his state of shock in these words: "I was so stunned that I walked around like I was in a trance. What they said just did not register. I heard the words, but they had not 'reached' me yet." He had this temporary anesthesia.

least celebrated contributions to Western culture was the literal first family of the parsonage. Before Luther there were no children of clergy. Their impact on our litury, Pelikan says, is enormous. Among them are - Woodrow Wilson, Henry Luce, Igmar Bergman, Walter Mondale, Emily and Charlotte Bronte, Frederich Nietzshie.

Luther's personal religious experience was profound. His theological achievement - the doctrine of Justification by faith - that we are saved by God's grace, not our own efforts, can only be understood, I believe, within the context of his years of struggle with its opposite, namely the theology of a demanding, righteous, angry and punishing God. Psychologists have had a wonderful time relating his theological anxiety to his obviously painful childhood. Be that as it may, Luther's marvelous celebration of Grace - God's unmerited love for all people, must be perceived in the context of his spiritual agony - his frustration and impotence to do anything to make himself good enough for God. Without that struggle - without some sense of personal inadequacy, Luther's doctrine of grace is likely to sound like easy religion: like getting to heaven without paying the price. That's the anomaly of grace, of course: it is good news only to those who know the bad news.

But it is Luther - the breaker of tradition, the iconoclast who interests me most today - as we reflect on his meeting for our present and future. In his early thirties, Luther bumped into a coterie of ecclesiastical officials who owed their livelihood to the presentation of the status quo, in a way reminiscent of the Lord he was trying to follow. Jesus was literally hounded by sincerely religious men who regarded him as a threat to their religion. Pharisees, devout religious zealots, and scribes - the interpreters of the religious law, came to hear what Jesus was saying. From all the towns and villages of Galilee and Judea they came. They came from Jerusalem as well. They came because they detected in the teachings of this itinerate preacher from Nazareth, a threat to the dearest traditions of their religion.

"Why do you eat with sinners?" they asked. "Why do you treat your own dietary and cleanliness laws with such disrespect? Why do you disregard the Sabbath regulations and why don't you fast. We fast twice a week. John the Baptist's disciples fast regularly. Every man in the street fasts at least once a year. Why don't you?" And hidden in their specific questions is the deeper one, the dangerous one: why aren't you willing to honor the sacred traditions of your own religion, your own people, your own nation?

"You can't put a new patch on an old piece of cloth," he said. "If you do, the new material will shrink and tear the old cloth again. And you can't put new wine in old skins," he said. "Because as the new wine continues to ferment it will burst old, inflexible skins - ruining container and spilling good new wine." Jesus was telling his contemporaries that their traditions had become too important. The wineskins exist for the sake of the wine. The customs, rituals and traditions of religion exist - not for their own sake, but in order to celebrate the one and living God.

The word here, clearly, is that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is like new wine. It transcends the older traditions. It is vital, full of creativity. It looks for new forms, new structure, new traditions. And it transcends those traditions as soon as they are established.

A moment ago I spoke about expressing emotions. It would be wrong to leave the impression that a person is less than human if he does not show his feelings openly. Some people do not express emotion visibly. Within themselves they may struggle with the same emotions of grief, but they insist on handling it by themselves. They don't want anyone "meddling" in their lives by trying to help with such a personal thing as grief. We usually should honor such a need for privacy.

The great majority of us, however, need to let loose of our emotions and we are strengthed when we do. We need the warm affection and encouragement of those around us. As we receive such caring, we begin to sense that there are still opportunities for meaningful life.

All of which is to say that grief can be used creatively, for good. By its very nature life is filled with real and difficult losses, both large and small. And let there be no mistake: The process of grief is painful, never pleasant; it is marked far more by oppressive darkness than by sunshine rays of obvious hope. But grief helps us overcome the fact of loss. It helps us survive and move through and beyond the darkness. Grieving is the process by which we are healed and returned to confident life.

Our grief is based on a faith and a hope. Grief helps us know that faith and hope after a shattering loss, perhaps know faith and hope more fully than ever. Therefore, when large or small loss comes, remember the Bible teaching: "Grieve not as those who have no hope," but, indeed, grieve!

Let us pray:
Most gracious, loving God, we thank you for the care you give in our times of sorrow. And we rejoice that through faith in you our life has a depth which grief cannot erase, a depth which allows us to live triumphantly in Christ's name. Amen.

plish those goals...Now we believe it is time to establish a new agenda...We believe it is imperative for Broad Street Presbyterian Church to continue to allow its life to be challenged and shaped by its sense of mission."

That was what happened at the Reformation. It is what occurred in Galilee 2000 years ago. The new wine of God's spirit - the new word of God's healing, liberating love, broke out of old traditions and found new ones. And it is to that mission, that courageous faith, that God calls his people today. It is, in fact, to be faithful to Brother Martin's reforming ways. It is to love the traditions - but always willing to move on to new ones. It is to be open to God's liberating spirit in our own lives, leading us into new tomorrows, full of hope and promise.

It is to be gloriously free - because the unchanging, eternal love of God - will be with us always: indeed - a Mighty Fortres, a bulwark never failing. Amen.

Biographical information on Luther from:

Here I Stand by Roland Bainton
A Short Life of Luther by Allan Townsend
Luther by Peter Manns